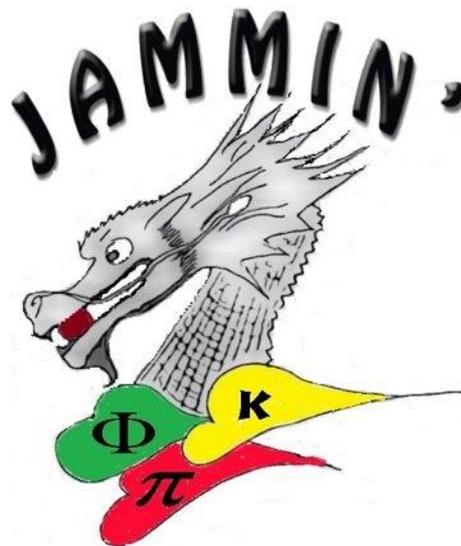


international society  
for philosophers

wisdom  
begins  
in wonder

## QUALIA FOR DUMMIES: EXAMPLES AND THEIR PHILOSOPHICAL IMPACT



# Ben O'Hare

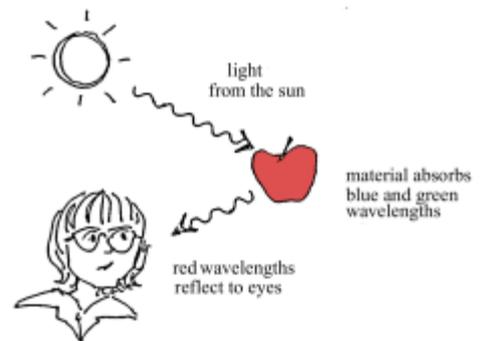
INDEX .....	2
THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING: QUALE.....	3
WAVELENGTH RED? .....	3
THINGS THAT EFFECT REDNESS .....	4
THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALIA .....	4
REFERENCES .....	6

3. Define a 'quale', giving some examples of qualia. What is the philosophical interest of the notion of a quale?

## THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING: QUALE

As the result of being an inquisitive child my father used to present questions to me such as: *“if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it is there a sound or if no one is looking at a red apple is it still red?”*

This is a puzzle because as every schoolchild is taught sound and light are waves in a physical medium that our physical brain processes and non-physical colours and sounds magically appear. Therefore, if no one was there to see the apple then they'd presumably still be the same wavelength of light coming off the apple but what about that mysterious non-physical sensation of red?

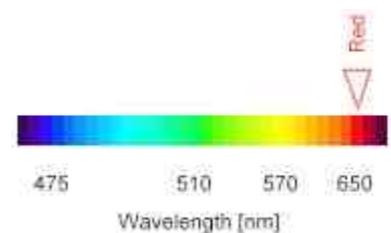


Our common sense view of our scientific understanding makes us think that light is something physical and that the sensation of red is non-physical. Therefore, it seems as though the sensation of red is not an attribute of the light but something non-physical – it is the non-physical us. It is perhaps even the real us.

The sensation of red thus seems problematic as it's so different from our common sense view of the physical world. Sensations such 'redness' or 'soundness' that we experience are called 'qualia' and are a bit of a puzzle causing a lot of argument, debate and several explanatory theories.

## WAVELENGTH RED?

We are taught in school that red light has a wavelength of about 650 nm. Our common sense description of what happens when we see something red is that a particle of light with a wavelength of 650 nm is absorbed by the eye and our brain produces the sensation red in us or for us. This could imply that there is a one to one correspondence between the 650 nm wavelength and the sensation red.



Could it be that 'red' is the experience one has when coming across light of the frequency 650nm unaffected by brain processing and recognition?

In fact it turns out that it is not just the wavelength of light that effects 'qualia' but a whole bundle of things in addition create an experience of awareness.



## THINGS THAT EFFECT REDNESS

It turns out that the surroundings, a person's mood (Ziems D1, 1998) (Raghupathy Paranthaman, 2010), culture (Saunders, 2000) and a list of other things effect the colours one sees for the wavelength of light of 650 nm.

In addition it turns out that the colours of ones surroundings effect ones sense of time (Gerald J. Gorn, 2004), and health (De Craen, 1996) (Elliot, 2007) (O'Connor, 2011).

Furthermore, it t is possible to be deprived of external sensations but this doesn't stop the experiences. In dreams we have experiences, sensations and awareness.

In addition, during extended or forced sensory deprivation can result in extreme hallucinations\_and bizarre thoughts (Grassian, 2003) (Haney, 2003) (Schwartz, 2005).

We also know that rainbows, holograms, dreams, and hallucinations are possible and do not correspond to anything physically.

However, despite knowing many things about 'qualia' they are still mysterious leading some to deny their existence and others to claim they are the fundamental reality.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALIA

Everything that been outlined so far leaves open the possibility that experience is caused by a combination of external stimuli and brain activity which is what a materialist would claim. The problem with this materialist picture is that there seems to be no way to explain how the non-material qualia are produced and according to Wikipedia the importance of qualia '*comes largely from the fact that it is seen as posing a fundamental problem for materialist explanations of the mind-body problem*' (Qualia, 2014).

*The problem, in the words of Schrodinger is* (Schrödinger, 2001):

*"The sensation of colour cannot be accounted for by the physicist's objective picture of light-waves. Could the physiologist account for it, if he had fuller knowledge than he has of the processes in the retina and the nervous processes set up by them in the optical nerve bundles and in the brain? I do not think so."*

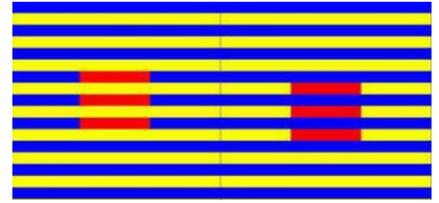


Figure 1 (these squares are blood red)

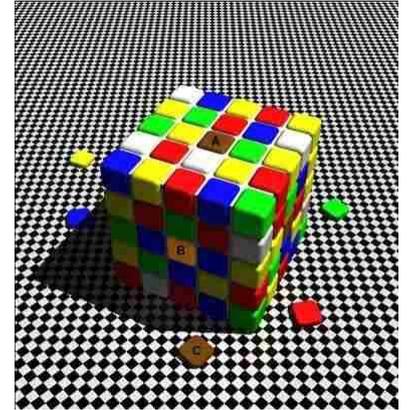


Figure 2 (A, B and C are all the same colour)

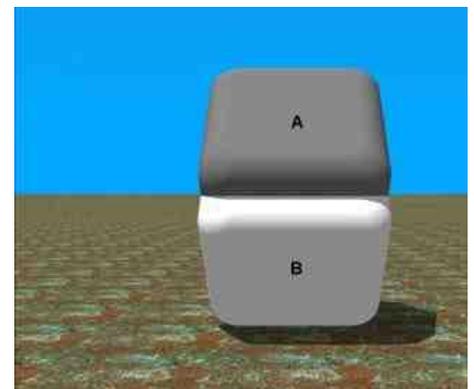


Figure 3 (both A and B are the same colour)

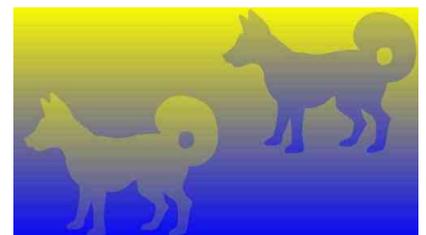


Figure 4 (both dogs are the same colour)

As Schrodinger pointed out science has been extremely successful in describing and predicting much of the material world but there seems to be something more, something non-physical. This common sense view that 'qualia' are something more than merely the physical world led philosophers such as Descartes to ponder the nature of this experience and posit explanations such as mind-body duality that materialism rejects. There are other theories that explain the same facts.

In a sense it is this experience of 'qualia' that leads us to posit that we are something non-physical. It often leads to the idea that we have a 'soul' that will survive the demise of our physical selves. In a sense, the question of 'qualia' is the question of *'who and what we are?'*

Socrates, the father of western philosophy said, *"...I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself"* (Fowler, 1925) and over two millenia later western philosophers are still claiming we do not know or even seek ourselves (Kaufmann, 1968):

*"We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge--and with good reason...So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend our- selves, we have to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies to all eternity--we are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves."*

The study of 'qualia' is fundamentally asking the same questions that puzzled Socrates, Descartes and Nietzsche about *'knowing thyself'*.

Because of this and more 'qualia' are very much centre stage in the debates in philosophy on the mind-body problem and also in the debates between religion and philosophy and also between religions.

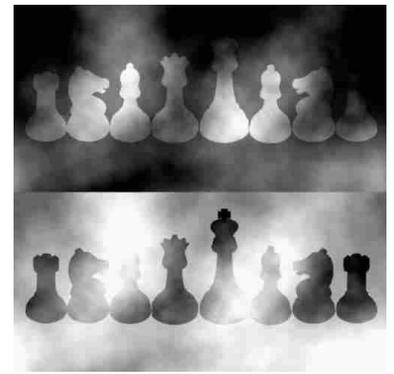


Figure 5 (the chess pieces are the same colour)

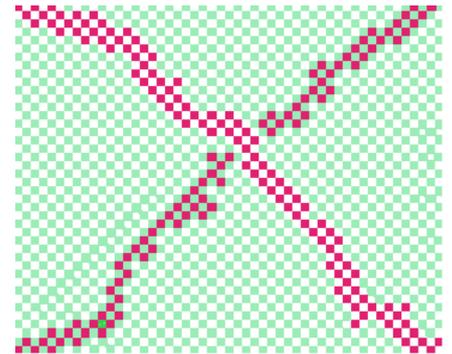


Figure 6 (there are only two colours: green and pink)

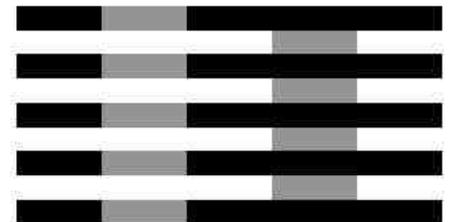


Figure 7 (the gray is the same colour on both sides)

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